

An Open Letter to Residents and Business Owners of the San Bernardino Mountains

By Gary Penrod, Sheriff

We have all just been through a disaster of historic proportions. And, of course, for those of you that lost loved ones or your homes, it's far from over. Within the Sheriff's Department alone, we had dozens of employees and their families inconvenienced by being evacuated and a few returned to find their homes destroyed. Thankfully, our employees suffered no serious injuries.

The planning and public education that took place in our mountains due to the extreme fire danger posed by the bark beetle infestation clearly paid off in an evacuation of unprecedented proportions that went about as smoothly as could be expected. As the fire progressed, community after community obeyed evacuation orders, quickly leaving roads clear for the thousands of firefighters from more than 300 fire departments who flooded into our mountains to help local fire districts protect homes and businesses.

At the height of the emergency, 130 deputy sheriffs from stations all around the county were assigned to an area normally patrolled by less than twenty. These deputies were supplemented by the California Highway Patrol and, at times, by officers from San Bernardino and Redlands Police Departments and the Riverside County Sheriff's Department.

As chaotic as it was, it worked. As far as we know, no one was trapped and injured in the Old Fire, although one person was critically burned near Mount Baldy by the Grand Prix Fire. There were no serious traffic collisions. There were no firefighters hit by cars or endangered by being trapped in traffic as the fire approached.

Recently, some officials have been quoted in media reports as saying that this disaster was our worst-case scenario.

But make no mistake, it could have been far worse.

The manner in which the Old Fire developed gave us time to evacuate the mountains safely. Our greatest fear has always been a fire that starts in the dead trees close to one of our mountain towns, upwind, on a hot windy day. Such a fire could quickly burn through a community, leaving too little time for people to get out. Escape routes would instantly become gridlocked and many people could lose their lives.

Such a scenario played out on a smaller scale in the Oakland Hills in October of 1991, when a wind-whipped vegetation fire quickly engulfed a hillside neighborhood, killing 27 people, including a firefighter and a police officer, as people abandoned their cars on jammed streets and tried to flee on foot. Three thousand homes were also lost.

During the Grand Prix and Old Fires, the Sheriff's Department worked closely with the wildland fire incident management teams to establish trigger points for evacuations. As a result, most people left the mountains safely, giving firefighters and their equipment room to maneuver, thereby saving many structures and allowing them to make an incredible stand along Highway 18. Everyone agrees that these men and women did a magnificent job in preventing more destruction, often at great personal risk.

In the aftermath, every agency is critiquing its operation, documenting lessons learned, and preparing for the next emergency.

Yet we are repeatedly hearing a very troubling report – that many people who evacuated this time are saying that they will not leave next time.

We know that folks who obeyed the evacuation orders were not able to return as quickly as they would have liked while those that did not leave seemed to have been inconvenienced minimally.

Several important points must be made here.

The law does not allow our deputies to remove people by force from their homes or business, except under the most extreme circumstances. However, the law does allow us to remove people from public places in emergencies and to prevent people from interfering with firefighters and law enforcement officers, whether on public or private property. Thankfully, these measures were never necessary during the Old Fire, primarily because so many people obeyed the evacuation orders.

While we understand that evacuation is inconvenient and puts property left behind at some risk, the alternative is to risk lives – many lives.

Firefighters, as well as the deputies who go into evacuated neighborhoods to try to prevent looting, have made careful preparations designed to prevent being trapped by a rapidly advancing fire. These plans, however, rely on open roadways for last minute escape routes, in the event that efforts to stop a fire fail.

If too many people remain behind and all try to flee at the same time, they not only risk their own lives but those of the firefighters and law enforcement officers who will be trapped with them.

I understand the frustration of not being able to return quickly to your homes. While every agency works to remedy things that could have been done better,

you should understand that there are often good reasons for delaying re-population of an evacuated area. Damaged mountain roads as well as hundreds of fire trucks with their crews remaining in the area complicate reintroduction of civilian cars and large numbers of people.

Even after the weather turned cool and wet, infrared imagery showed active fire in several areas near Running Springs and Lake Arrowhead – even though we couldn't see them in the clouds. Firefighters had to go into very rugged terrain on foot to suppress these hot spots by hand before it was safe to allow people back into nearby communities.

It is important to note that the deadly 1991 Oakland Hills fire started out as a routine vegetation fire that was thought to have been extinguished the day before, only to rekindle in the wind the following day with devastating results.

So, my message is this:

First, thank you for the cooperation that limited the injuries and loss of life in the recent fires to a tiny fraction of what they could have been.

Understand that the majority of dead trees in our mountains did not burn and continue to pose a grave fire threat.

Believe that the Sheriff's Department, in conjunction with fire departments and other allied agencies, is critiquing its recent efforts with the intent to fix problems and implement the lessons we learned in preparation for future emergencies.

Most importantly, understand that we are likely to need your cooperation again. You may again be asked to quickly pack your most valuable possessions, leave your homes and businesses behind and be inconvenienced by evacuation.

Hopefully, you will be better prepared to evacuate just as we will be better prepared to protect you and your belongings in the process.

You must understand that refusing to leave dramatically raises the stakes in several ways, including risking deadly traffic jams that can jeopardize not only your own lives but also those of the very firefighters and law enforcement officers you rely upon to protect you.

Finally, on a lighter note, I'd like to take this opportunity to publicly thank the thousands of men and women who worked tirelessly for nearly two weeks to battle the fires and the numerous crises caused by them. In addition to the firefighters who somehow were able to hold the fire at bay until weather intervened, I'd like to thank virtually every member of the Sheriff's Department – including hundreds of volunteers, who pitched in to do whatever was needed to safeguard our citizens. Our allied law enforcement agencies were there when we needed them, providing invaluable help.

Credit also goes to the folks that managed this enormously complex emergency. The U.S. Forest Service, California Department of Forestry and County Fire Department embraced law enforcement in several unified commands that contributed enormously to orderly evacuations that were based on accurate timely estimates of the fire threat. The County Fire Department's Emergency Operations Center pulled managers together from a wide variety of public and private organizations, often allowing decisions on complex problems to be made in minutes that otherwise would have taken days.

So, once again, thanks to everyone – citizens and public servants alike – for all your hard work!